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A Palestinian Refugee Woman Narrative

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the extent of Palestinian refugee women's suffering they have gone through since the massive expulsion of the Palestinian people out of their land in 1948. Accordingly, the purpose of the study was to identify the different themes and concerns encoded in the narrative of a Palestinian refugee woman named Zwaida. In order to attain this purpose, the researchers applied content analysis on an authentic narrative account told by this woman. The study attempted to answer two main questions. The first question was concerned with the validity of the account of that refugee woman, and the second question concentrated on the kinds of themes encoded in such an authentic narrative. To answer these questions, the researchers used the methodology based on a single qualitative content analysis and data collection gathered from an unstructured interview. The outcome of the analysis revealed the extent of suffering those refugee women went through after their displacement; in addition, it revealed that a woman like Zwaida had to vacillate between two concerns; the first one national, while the other personal. Finally, the researchers recommended that a further analysis of refugee women's narrative be conducted in order to reach certain conclusions that help the world better understand the Palestinian ordeal.

Keywords: refugee woman – narrative – content analysis – double consciousness

I. Introduction

It is widely known that the issue of the Palestinian refugees is one of the most irksome problems for the peace loving people and nations all over the world. The massive and collective expulsion of the Palestinians out of their homeland in 1948 was an unprecedented act of colonialism based on uprooting a whole nation out of its land and replacing it by scattered groups coming from diverse countries with a Zionist dream built on a mythical and radical religious vision of the Promised Land. Many Palestinians who survived the coercive expulsion still have fresh memories of that painful experience.

Since their trauma of displacement, most Palestinian refugees have been lodged in camps in- and outside Palestine. At the outset of their expulsion, they thought that their displacement would not last long; they were confident that it would be a matter of days, and they would be allowed to go back to their homes and land. Ironically, this displacement has continued for more than six decades and it seems that the refugee status has become an indication of a forced identity.

Nowadays, the problem of the Palestinian refugees has aggravated mainly as a consequence of the political upheaval pervading some Arab countries in the Middle East. Those refugees, along with their offspring, are reliving the experience of displacement. Many of them are currently displaced from their camps of refuge and trying to seek shelters in other countries. This is due to the fact that the camps where they have been living, whether inside or outside Palestine, have become like concentration camps either because of a suffocating siege as is the case of the camps inside Palestine, mainly Gaza camps, or by the turmoil of internal clashes and conflicts as it is the case in their refuge Arab countries.

In the light of this ongoing displacement, the world has started to get a renewed interest in getting at the truth of the initial displacement the Palestinians went through. Such kind of truth is difficult to fathom without listening to a firsthand and authentic account from one of the refugee who lived such an experience and then to subject it to meticulous analysis based on the interpretation of certain messages encoded in it.

A) Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper was to apply a content analysis methodology to an authentic account told by a Palestinian refugee woman in an attempt to highlight certain themes and encoded messages related to her experience as a refugee and as a woman. The presentation of this account and its interpretation is also intended to reveal to those interested in the Palestinian question the truth of the displaced Palestinians' suffering and trauma.

B) Study Questions

The study attempted to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the true experiences of displaced Palestinian refugee woman (initial codes)?
2. What themes and lessons can be derived from the Palestinian refugee woman's firsthand account (focused codes)?
- 3.

C) Significance of the Study

The significance of the study arises from the fact that it presents a firsthand testimony of what Palestinian refugees in general and a refugee women in particular went through as a result of their expulsion from their own towns and villages in 1948. The study also provides a live testimony of the hardships and traumatic experiences encountered by those Palestinian refugees.

II. Literature Review

Having the impulse to talk about whatever experience one might go through is generally natural and universal (Wengraf, 2001). When people find themselves abruptly and forcibly expelled out of their homeland, the only thing left for them is to narrate and to tell the story about the suffering and the pain of this displacement. Such narrators would be very careful to convey a message in order to explain the extent of agony and plight they have experienced because of this displacement. Usually this story has certain thematic orientations encoded between the lines (Riessman, 2008); these thematic concerns become central to any act of interpretation or analysis. However, when a story is told by a woman, the act of analysis becomes more complicated because usually the feminist discourse works at the level of what Du Bois (1903/1990) coined as 'double consciousnesses'. In such discourse the narrator tries to reconcile certain contradictory concerns in order to convey the message and thus a researcher's main concern becomes framing and analyzing women's raw words to become 'testimonial literature' (Sayigh, 2002). However, prior to the analysis of the woman's story, the paper will give an account of what it means to be a refugee, a Palestinian refugee and a Palestinian refugee woman in particular, and what content analysis is.

A) Who is a refugee?

The identity of many people is linked to a passport, identity card, birthplace, or culture. They have a home. But what would they do if they could not define their sense of self in relation to any of these things nor could they live their life peacefully on a land they can call home? That is the dilemma they will face when they are forced to leave their country; they become refugees (Gilmour, 1980). According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is a person who is outside the country of his nationality and unable to return for fear of being persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Accordingly a refugee is a person who is dislocated in terms of identity and nationhood. 'Refugees' can also be defined as forced migrants who are afforded "an internationally recognised legal status, given credibility by an international agency specifically charged to safeguard their interests, endorsed most powerfully of all by spontaneous philanthropy" (Zetter, 1991: 40).

However, it is worthwhile mentioning that the Israelis have continually attempted to make the status of the Palestinian refugees very evasive. They have tried to void that status from any political or national connotations; they want the world to believe that the whole problem of the Palestinians is humanitarian and these refugees are a group of people who receive UNRWA's assistance in terms of food, health, and education.

B) Who are Palestinian refugees?

Palestinian refugees are hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who in 1948 were uprooted from their home towns and villages and turned into a fast-growing refugee population residing in crowded camps in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (Halabi, 2005). The exact number of the refugees varied from one source to another. Palestinian estimates state that their number in 1948 exceeded 75000 refugees (Gabiam, 2005). The least estimates of the number of the Palestinian refugees were those of the Israelis. According to Karsh (2011), the number of the Palestinian refugees who were forced to abandon their cities and villages was ranging between 55000 and 60000 (p. 224). The number of Palestinian refugees is currently about 5 million (Jaspal & Coyle, 2014).

Regardless of the exact number of those refugees, this abrupt expulsion turned three-quarters of all Palestinians into refugees and forced them to change their lives from largely rural existence (which most of the refugees were) to living in cramped camps, a ghetto-like existence (Abdo, 2000). Their dislocation from the only homes they had ever known and the new condition of having nothing resulted in intense insecurity, bewilderment, a sense of loss and grieving, and above all, uncertainty about the future. These former peasants were "uprooted" and "felt powerless in the wake of the sudden loss of control over their destiny and an intense frustration over the inability of any person, institution, or government to remedy their situation (Peteet, 1991: 24). Consequently, Palestine ceased to exist; it lost its name; it lost its territory.

Nonetheless, Palestinian refugees, generation after generation, have entertained the hope of returning to their homes and never lost their Palestinian identity and dignity. Neither time nor preoccupation with survival requirements has made them forget their long-held hope and identity because if one's identity is lost, one will be amorphous. Therefore, Palestinians have been perpetually fighting to maintain their identity and emphasizing their right of return to every place they were uprooted from in historical Palestine.

C) What is it like to be a refugee Palestinian woman?

Refugee women are more vulnerable to exploitation and deprivation of rights, at every stage of flight, than are refugee men despite the exceptional resistance and resourcefulness of refugee women and their ability to cope with tremendous hardships (Feeney, 1995). Once they find themselves in the alien environment of temporary encampments, women are more likely to suffer

the effects of poor camp design, in terms of lack of privacy and safety, and therefore become more vulnerable (Peters & Wolper, 1995).

Refugee women are double victims; first by the general violence caused by political strife and further by violence perpetrated against them by members of their own community (Sayigh, 2002). These refugee Palestinian women had previously only known how to be farmers' wives and mothers but under the new and ever changing circumstances, simple women had to learn how to be exceptionally resourceful, dependable, resilient, and adaptable. Therefore, in such situations women assume double identities: one national and the other personal, and their attempts to distinguish between these two identities give rise to the double consciousness of the self; the first one is objective and the other is subjective (Gupta & Sullivan, 2013).

D) What is content analysis?

According to Neuman (1997), content analysis is a technique for examining information, or content, in written or symbolic material in which a researcher first identifies a body of material to analyze and then creates a system for recording specific aspects of it. The system might include counting how often certain words or themes occur. Finally, the researcher records what was found in the material. Bauer (2000) states that content analysis bridges statistical formalism and the qualitative analysis of materials. A central part of qualitative analysis involves extracting meaning from collected textual materials (Krippendorff, 1980). Sometimes, a deductive approach is employed to code the data using theoretically pre-assigned code categories (Leavy, 2000). Researchers use a "focused" coding procedure which allows for the building and clarification of such concepts (Lofland, et al. 1995). The themes are developed from available data and correlate the data to the political, economic, and social circumstances prevailing the eras referred to in the narrator's story (Krippendorff, 1980). Content analysis is a useful technique for it allows researchers to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social intention (Stemler, et al. 2001).

Perhaps due to the fact that it can be applied to examine any piece of writing or occurrence of recorded communication, content analysis is currently used in a dizzying array of fields, ranging from marketing and media studies, to literature and rhetoric, ethnography and cultural studies, gender and age issues, sociology and political science, psychology and cognitive science, and many other fields of inquiry (Weber, 1990). Additionally, content analysis reflects a close relationship with socio- and psycholinguistics (Lofland, et al. 1995). However, a caveat should be taken into consideration that content analysis is an attempt to analyze what has already been interpreted by the narrator before the researcher even reaches the data analysis phase of the research process (Pavlish, 2007: 29). Accordingly, the researchers of the current study intended to apply this type of content analysis on what the refugee woman encoded in her account.

III. Method

A) Research design and sample

This study utilized a single case qualitative content analysis method, which aims to uncover and understand the big picture by using the data to describe the phenomenon and what this means. It also involved using initial and focused coding of the refugee woman's narrative in order to uncover her message and draw some themes out of what she said.

B) Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study were collected by using an unstructured interview, which allowed the researchers to focus the refugee woman's talk on the particular topics of interest, and gave them the opportunity to test out his or her preliminary understanding, while still allowing for ample opportunity for new ways of seeing and understanding to develop. The unstructured interview also helped the researchers to unfold the meaning of the woman's experiences and to understand the world from her point of view.

IV. Findings & Conclusion

Findings are mapped out into two sections, each of which answers one of the research questions.

1. Answer to the first question:

The first question of the study was stated as follows: What are the true experiences of displaced Palestinian refugee woman? To answer this question, the researchers analyzed the narrative a Palestinian refugee woman called Zwaida, who was in her mid eighties. Like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, Zwaida, a young woman at that time of her displacement, was forced to leave her home village with her family under the frequent attacks of Israeli gangs and the inability of the Arab armies and the international community to protect them. They left behind everything except for some provisions which would help them survive the few following days. They were sure that the civilized world would not accept such a situation and would help them go back to their homes and land in no time. Unexpectedly, absence from home prolonged and Zwaida and her family had to live as tramps in the Gaza streets until they were accommodated in the so-called temporary shelters built for them in the Gaza Beach Camp. Zwaida's account depicts part of her experience in that camp. In this content analysis, the initial coding of the narrative reveals, through its seven different labels, Zwaida's experience of displacement. These labels emerged through the use of qualitative content analysis methods from a feminist perspective to classify and assign meaning to pieces of information to help make sense of qualitative data. Following are the seven labels resulting from the initial coding.

a) Private shelter

For someone who has been expelled from his or her own home and familiar surroundings and who experienced homelessness for a number of days, finding a shelter to protect him or her becomes a priority, regardless of the humbleness of such a shelter. Zwaida describes her first shelter after expulsion by saying:

“We were living in a house built of mud bricks and roofed with tiles. It consisted of two rooms, in front of which there was a wide yard. There was no toilet or bathroom. These were set up in the streets and shared by all camp dwellers.”

b) Satisfying basic needs

After the settlement of the refugees in their new ‘temporary’ shelters, they started to look for satisfying their basic needs of food, drink and clothes. This topic was pervasive in Zwaida’s narrative. For example, when she talks about getting water, she elaborates on this by saying:

“Our houses didn’t have running water, so we had to go to the water pump positioned out in the street to fill our clay vessels with water. We felt extremely fatigued while trying to get water. All people had to wait in queues to be able to get water.”

In another context, Zwaida talks about getting different items of food saying:

“The entire economy of the camp depended on what UNRWA provided of flour, sugar, oil, rice and dry dates. What was then needed were vegetables which we purchased from markets... as we could not afford buying meat; fish was abundant and on many days we ate fish.”

As regards obtaining clothes, Zwaida elaborated by saying:

“UNRWA also started to distribute second-hand clothes to the refugees. Our happiness was limitless when we could get some clothes because of the abject poverty we underwent in the Beach Camp. Every family member was eager to know what his or her share of the clothes was.”

c) Abject Poverty

Poverty among the refugees represents a legacy of the refugees’ inability to generate sufficient income in order to provide for themselves the ‘minimum basic needs’ (Hajoj, 2007). The state of abject poverty experienced by the majority of camp residents, who fled for their lives and left their land and valuables behind them, was still haunting the refugees even after more than one decade of their displacement. This condition is evident in Zwaida’s account when she says:

“During those days [during the Egyptian Administration of the Gaza Strip between 1959 and 1967] work was scarce and salaries were very low... the economic life was difficult inside the camp. My father was an old man and his monthly income was seven Egyptian pounds.”

d) Industriousness & self-sacrifice for one's family

With limited resources, Palestinian refugees, who have lost their homes and properties, consider human resources as their most valuable asset and thus education investment in education is indispensable to building the economy and general prosperity, as well as key to ensuring an enabling socio-cultural environment that supports women (Puechguirbal, 2014). Zwaida capitalizes on this particular point when she says:

“We were industrious in our study so that the girl could upgrade her family's standard of living, get a job, and rescue her family from the abject poverty it was living in.”

e) Life keeps going on with all its ups and downs

People who have a strong faith in the legitimacy of their cause will never lose hope and will always see light at the end of the tunnel. Such unshaken hope and faith will always empower them to and help them endure any hardships to keep going on in life. This point was clear in Zwaida's narration of the ensuing circumstances in the camp. At this juncture, she states:

“After the mud houses, the camp developed and houses were built with cement bricks and were roofed with asbestos and bathrooms were built inside the houses and were supplied with running water. Life developed and electricity was installed in the camp and we started to use electricity instead of kerosene lamps and gas ovens and stoves instead of the kerosene ones.”

f) Occupation haunts the camp provides life opportunities!

The Israeli occupation appetite to devour the Palestinian land and people never seems to be satisfied. After expelling Palestinian refugees from their homes and land in 1948, it chased them to their camps in Gaza and the West Bank in 1967. This renewed occupation seemed to have paradoxical connotations in Zwaida's words:

"After the Israeli occupation and the availability of money because of work chances inside Israel, life became very expensive; this means money was available but prices were higher and economic life was much better than before. Prior to 1967, life was difficult and harsh and was considered primitive, but now there are many comfortable devices."

g) Hiding a woman's identity

In her account, Zwaida alludes to women's hidden struggles within a patriarchal society. Such allusion is exemplified in Zwaida's following words:

“Getting to those restrooms was extremely daunting; the refugee woman had to cover herself with a blanket, hold her water jug in her hand, and go to the restroom.” In this regard, the double consciousness line of narration is more inclined towards subjective identity rather the objective one. Here she seems to be obsessed with personal issues more than the national ones.

2. Answer to the second question

The second question of the study was stated as follows: What themes and lessons can be derived from the Palestinian refugee woman's firsthand account? To answer this question, the researchers analyzed the refugee woman's narrative using focused coding, which resulted in the emergence of three themes that can fit well under an even more overarching one. These themes were as follows.

a) Soon after expulsion, refugees seek an alternative place to live:

After their violent and unjust expulsion from their homes and villages, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians found themselves without any shelter that could protect them from the harshness of the weather and political fluctuations. They became homeless or tramps in the true sense of the word. They lost the walls and the roofs that protected them and made them enjoy their privacy in addition to their humanity. Living in the open like wild beasts is a harsh experience for everyone, especially for women.

One of the main themes associated with feminist discourse is the issue of women's space, specifically, the public versus the private, and the overlap of the two. According to Price-Chalita (1994), spatial language and constructs are deployed systematically by women's writing and narrative; disempowerment is couched in negative spatial terms: as "displacement", having space denied, or as a negative or non-space, while empowerment is used as an appropriation of the spatial: creating new spaces, occupying existing spaces, or revalorizing negatively labeled spaces.

In the Palestinian society, which is largely conservative, the private space is the women's domain – a sphere of existence in which she feels familiar, in control and empowered. It is the space which gives her a sense of identity and purpose (Rastegar, 2006). Therefore, a quantitative content analysis of Zwaida's account revealed that words related to places (i.e. house, room,

restroom, bathroom, camp and bakery) are of much higher frequency than any other words, even those referring to food.

Feeling that her space had been encroached upon and violated, Zwaida realized that her privacy as well her identity had been lost. Therefore, she disguised herself with the blanket when she went to the restroom, an indication of a lost identity: "the refugee woman had to cover herself with a blanket". Moreover, in her attempt to restore her private space and privacy, she wanted everything, including the bakery, to be inside the home: "We started to build the restrooms inside the houses... Restrooms became inside the houses... The bakery was outside the house". She also identified her own place as being different or even separated from that of men by referring to the fact the men's public restrooms were some distance from those for women: "There was a distance of 20 to 30 meters separating between men's and women's restrooms and bathrooms". Again the overriding consciousness here is that of a woman who was overburdened with domestic tasks that are exclusive to women in a patriarchal society. In this sense Zwaida is double subjugated; she is rendered displaced by the act of expulsion and relegated an inferior position by her masculine society.

b) Refugees show unique persistence to survive and move on in life:

No doubt, the suffering associated with losing one's home and being forced to leave the place where one grew up is an experience akin to bereavement. However, in spite of all the suffering, anxiety, and loss, the Palestinian refugees demonstrated a tremendous degree of resilience and a strong will to survive. As long as people entertain a hope, they will have a reason to live. Those people's hope was their return to their own towns and villages and thought that their stay in camps would be temporary. This held hope made them bear the harsh life conditions and look for the means that might help them to survive these dark moments that precede the dawn.

So, for the first two years, before UNRWA's operations, the refugees had to depend on themselves and one another as well as the support of their relatives in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank or those in the Arab countries. A good example of cooperation is illustrated in Zwaida's account when she says, "The camp residents from Jaffa and Al-Joura were experienced fishermen and started to teach other residents how to catch fish." This good instance of cooperation in pursuit of collective survival may contradict another incident depicted in Zwaida's story when she says: "Many disputes and quarrels took place among people queuing in front of the pump". A possible explanation of this contradiction is that the latter event took place soon after the refugees' expulsion and the violence practiced against them by the Israeli gangs. Consequently, everyone cared about his or her own survival and not that of the others. After UNRWA's operation in 1950, most refugees became dependent on it for their basic survival requirements. It provided them with food and clothes, and they had to take care of other stuff such as vegetables and meat.

In these tragic circumstances, Zwaida shouldered some responsibilities necessary for her family survival, and despite the fatigue she experienced, she went on shouldering those responsibilities: "We encountered huge fatigue while trying to get water. I used to fill a whole barrel with water using a clay pot... we made the dough at home and carried it on our heads to the bakery." What is more, she expresses her determination to study hard to get a job and help her family in getting out of its abject poverty. It seems that her father's old age and powerlessness had been compensated for by her powerful will and determination.

This stand is very common in feminist writing and thinking. At time of conflict, women shoulder more responsibilities and suffer more than men do. At all times, these women, and in the fashion of Homer's Odyssey, embark on their heroic pursuit in order to provide the family with all means of subsistence (Smith, 1990). Unlike the American frontier men's wives who reckoned their perseverance and endurance as an act of faith and redemption, the Palestinian refugee women of the never resigned to mere endurance. They had to leave the house in order to support the family. It clear then, that Zwaida is vacillating between two identities, the national and the personal.

c) Refugees' instinct for survival never vanishes despite difficulties and hardships:

Not satisfied with the land it had seized and the catastrophe it had caused to these Palestinian refugees, the Israeli occupation chased them even into those narrow spaces they had been cramped into. Zwaida's feelings toward this second wave of occupation were paradoxical and mixed, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. This is clearly evident in the contradictory language she uses:

"After the Israeli occupation and the availability of money because of work chances inside Israel, life became very expensive; this means money was available but prices were higher and economic life was much better than before."

Positive references to occupation can be attributed to these refugees' desire to survive and improve their living conditions. The negative feelings towards occupation may be connected with their past experience of expulsion, homelessness, and pain caused by this same occupation: "... after the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip, the quantities [of UNRWA's aid] became less and only some particular people could get them."

All of the three themes above can be summed up under one major overarching theme which is 'refugees search for survival after expulsion from home and land and being cramped into a camp'.

A very interesting feature in this narrative sketch is the mythical image the narrator depicts of herself and other fellow Palestinian women. The frequent use of the pronoun 'we' is an indication of the strong intent of those women to bring back the lost peace and privacy which were usurped by the occupiers. According to Halliday's (1994) Ideational Model, women

intensively opt for the topical themes represented by "I" and "we". The pronoun "we" is, most of the times, a collective pronoun used exclusively to represent the Palestinian refugee women. Again, this is a further demonstration of the double consciousness technique the narrator was adopting in her narrative to juxtapose the national with the personal identity in order to show how excessive the refugee women's ordeal was.

To conclude, analyzing a refugee woman's narrative helped to reveal the extent of suffering those women went through after the expulsion of a whole nation out of its own land. The content analysis conducted on the narrative of one of those refugee women revealed different themes encoded in such a narrative; in addition, it helped to show how refugee women tried to assume double identity: one subjective and personal, while the other objective and national. Therefore, the researchers do recommend that further analysis of other refugee women's narrative be conducted in order to further explore the ongoing ordeal of those women who have been living the trauma of displacement since 1948. Such analysis would eventually lead to the emergence of certain motifs that govern the collective narrative of the whole displaced nation.

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